



**2006 State of the State Address
Governor Rod R. Blagojevich
January 18, 2006**

A little more than three years ago, the people of Illinois decided to bring us together to chart a new course. To make Illinois once again the land of opportunity. To shake up the system here in Springfield that accepted mediocrity and failure. To make state government begin again to work for the people, rather than the other way around.

Despite facing one of the most challenging periods in our state's history, Illinois today is now leading the nation in taking steps that help real people, people who work, middle class families, build better lives. We are making real progress – but there is much more to do.

I believe in the basic democratic principle that government can be - and must be - a force for good. An active government that helps people and rights wrongs is what our founding fathers envisioned, it's what Abraham Lincoln believed in, it's what makes serving in government worthwhile.

When we came together three years ago to begin our journey, we walked into a mess. To understand where we are today, we must remember how far we've come. We inherited a recession, a \$5 billion deficit, and a government that was bloated, ineffective and had all the wrong priorities: education was neglected, health care was a privilege, the minimum wage was too low, and jobs were too scarce.

In spite of these difficult times, we've made real progress for people. Instead of just sitting on the sidelines and using these challenges as an excuse for inaction, we embraced them as an opportunity to change the old ways, to re-order and re-prioritize government and make it start working for people again.

I believe that if things weren't so bad back then, we wouldn't have been able to make the changes we've made to make things so much better right now.

Yes, the \$5 billion budget hole could have been filled with massive cuts in health care. We could have cut education. We could have raised taxes and asked people to have less money in their paychecks.

A lot of people said you couldn't increase funding for schools, provide health care for kids, eliminate the deficit and do it all without raising taxes.

But we found a different way.

And that way didn't mean asking the working people of our state to bail us out. Families across Illinois are struggling enough to make ends meet. It's not their job to bail us out. It's our job to help them.

That has been our governing principle: do everything you can to help families get ahead and build better lives.

That means an Illinois where every family - and especially every child - has access to good, affordable health care; an Illinois where every child can get a good education; and an Illinois where those same children can then afford to go to college so they can develop their skills and get a good job.

It means an Illinois where good jobs remain good jobs – jobs that stay in this state and stay in this country. An Illinois that's safe from street crime, safe from gang crime, safe from terrorism.

And an Illinois that treats everyone equally and fairly, no matter where you come from or what you look like.

That's our vision for this state.

And it's a vision we've worked hard to turn into reality over the past three years. It hasn't come without a struggle. It hasn't always been easy. But then again, nothing in life worth having ever is.

Today, state government now works more for the people out there and less for the special interests around here.

We have turned things around, dramatically changed priorities, and the results are clear.

Illinois is now the only state that guarantees access to affordable, comprehensive health care for every single child.

Illinois now leads the nation in making health care available to working men and women. 400,000 people who didn't have health care three years ago now have health care today.

Illinois now does more than any other state to help senior citizens pay for the high cost of prescription drugs.

We're now a state that has invested more money in its schools in the last three years than any other state in the Midwest, and more money in our schools than 43 other states across the nation.

We raised graduation standards for the first time in 21 years so that students will learn more.

And to help children start learning sooner, we've dramatically expanded pre-school, putting us among the top three states in the nation.

We're now a state that led 44 others in job creation in the last year – a state where businesses are investing and industries like coal are coming back to life.

We're now a state where crime has fallen by nearly 7%, and a state that has a homeland security record better than almost any other.

We are well on our way to being the only state to convert its entire tollway to Open Road Tolling. That means drivers no longer having to stop or even slow down just to pay a toll.

And today – Illinois is a fairer state – than we were three years ago. We're a state that guarantees more rights and more opportunities to African Americans, to Latinos, to immigrants, to women, and to gays and lesbians – in short, more opportunities for men and women across our state who for far too long have been denied an equal chance to live a better life.

Ladies and gentlemen, Illinois is now a state where more people have health care, where we have more money and higher standards for our schools, where crime is down and where jobs are up. By working together, and making tough choices, we were able to do all of this while eliminating a \$5 billion budget deficit, and without asking people to pay more in taxes.

And we did all of this despite policies coming out of Washington that have been indifferent and sometimes even hostile to the very people we've been trying to help.

When the federal government stalled or took steps that have hurt working and middle class families, we've consistently stepped up and filled the void.

When Washington wouldn't raise the minimum wage, we did.

When Washington wouldn't guarantee women equal pay for equal work, we did.

When Washington tried to strip overtime pay from workers we made it clear that here in Illinois – overtime pay still means time and a half over forty and double time on Sundays

This administration in Washington supports tax breaks and pursues trade policies that encourage companies to move jobs overseas.

If you're a factory worker or an engineer, a medical technician or a customer service representative, a software designer or a stock analyst, you can walk into work one morning and find out that you've been replaced by someone in another part of the world. Their trade policies have resulted in nearly one million American jobs being sent to other countries.

That may be acceptable policy in Washington. But it's not in Illinois. They send jobs to India. We brought OfficeMax to Naperville. They send jobs to China. We helped Chrysler expand in Belvidere. They send jobs to Indonesia. We brought Pella Windows to Macomb.

In fact, in the last three years, we've completed 320 different deals, spurring \$4.5 billion in new private investment in Illinois.

And throughout that period, we've taken steps to make Illinois more attractive to businesses. Whether it's reforming the workers compensation system, forging a bipartisan effort to reduce medical malpractice costs, helping small businesses afford the high cost of health insurance, improving our infrastructure by rebuilding the Tollway, expanding O'Hare, developing a plan for Peotone, opening the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, building the Sparta Shooting Complex, reviving the film industry, or expanding programs and tax credits used to bring new jobs to Illinois – our efforts are paying off.

In the last year, Illinois has created more jobs than 44 other states. We have the lowest unemployment rate since June of 2001. Hotel receipts are up. Corporate profits are up. Foreign direct investment is up. Exports are up. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library is outdrawing the Clinton Presidential Library. In fact, we expect the Library's 500,000th visitor to walk through the doors sometime later today or early tomorrow. We were named the top state for biotechnology, and Illinois is ranked fourth in the nation for foreign investment. We have come a long way. But we can't stop now.

So I am here today, to ask all of you here in the General Assembly – Democrats and Republicans alike – to join me – let's pass a jobs bill that creates 230,000 more jobs all across our state. 230,000 jobs. Construction jobs. Manufacturing jobs. These are good jobs. Jobs that pay good wages and good benefits. These are jobs that give families a chance to build a future. Jobs in every part of our state. And if we pass this bill now, we can put people to work as soon as this summer.

Our jobs bill means creating more than 85,000 jobs through mass transit construction, more than 7,000 jobs through school construction, and more than 140,000 jobs through road construction. A jobs bill that gives opportunity to hard working people who are trying to get ahead and raise their families.

We can build roads all around our state: roads like Route 51 in Decatur, widen I-55 outside of Chicago, widen Route 13 from Marion to Carterville, improve Route 2 in Rockford, Route 5 in Moline, build the Technology Boulevard in Peoria, start work on the Mississippi River bridge, and realize the dream of making Route 336 a gateway from Chicago all the way to Kansas City.

Projects like these help companies reduce the cost of moving products to market, help people get to and from work, and by the way, when we're out there pitching Illinois to businesses, selling them on our infrastructure has proven to be one of the best arguments we can make.

And there's another reason to pass this bill. If we don't, we risk losing \$3 billion in federal transportation funds to other states.

We have to make our federal match. If we do, that means new buses in Danville, Rockford and Champaign, it means creating new commuter lines from downtown Chicago to the suburbs, and it means better transit facilities in Galesburg, Macomb and Rock Island.

And let's build new schools. Many of our schools are old, in disrepair, and are crowded. We need more schools. We need more class space. We need to give our students better places to learn and our teachers better places to teach.

I'm asking you to join me in supporting a major public works initiative. There are roads and bridges and highways across Illinois that need to be built and need to be fixed. We need to build new schools and help commuters who rely on mass transit. These are things that need to be done.

So we should do them. And if we do them, we will give people all around Illinois the opportunity to go to work. 230,000 jobs all across Illinois. Jobs in every part of Illinois. Jobs in your district. Not a handful of jobs, a lot of jobs.

And when I say jobs, these are good jobs. Laborers laying asphalt for the expansion of Route 2. Ironworkers fabricating the support beams for the new Mississippi River Bridge. And do you know what these jobs pay? They can pay anywhere from \$40,000 all the way to \$120,000 a year.

These are good paying jobs. And if we are prepared to put partisan politics aside, and work together in a constructive way, we can create these jobs all across Illinois.

So please, let's pass this jobs bill. Let's put people to work.

Four years ago, Washington gave us a program called No Child Left Behind. They told us they wanted better schools, but what we ended up with was more bureaucracy and more mandates -- and then they forgot to send the check. So we took matters into our own hands.

First, we've increased education funding by \$2.3 billion. That's more than any administration has ever done in one term in Illinois history. Just a few short years ago, Illinois was next to last in education funding equity. But because of the investments we've made over the last three years, we've invested more money in our schools than 43 other states including every state in the Midwest. The result is a fairer way to fund our schools.

Second, we have made early childhood education a priority and we have put our money where our mouth is. We've expanded funding for pre-school by 50%, given 25,000 more three and four year olds a chance to start school early, and Illinois is now ranked among the top three states in the nation for early childhood education.

Third, we raised high school graduation standards. Now, in order to graduate from our high schools, students are required take more math, more science, more reading, and more writing. These new standards mean students graduating from our high schools will be better prepared when they go to college and more skilled when they enter the workforce.

In the coming weeks, I'll be presenting a budget. And in that budget, I'm going to propose several major initiatives on early childhood education and K-12 education. But today, I'd like to talk about helping parents send their children to college.

No matter how young your children are, if you're a parent, you're probably asking yourself this question: how are we going to pay for college? My daughters are nine and two, and like all parents, their college tuition is something my wife Patti and I think about all of the time.

On average, it costs more than \$7,000 a year in tuition and fees to attend a public university in Illinois. It costs more than \$18,000 a year to attend a private institution.

Three years ago, we enacted a law called Truth in Tuition, which says that the tuition you pay as a freshman is the tuition you pay as a senior. And over the last three years, we've expanded the MAP program to help 20,000 more parents afford college and help those students go to college.

But now Washington is making it even harder. The most recent federal deficit reduction package would slash college financial aid by \$13 billion dollars.

Washington has its priorities all mixed up. On the one hand, their policies encourage the outsourcing of jobs. On the other, they're trying to cut college scholarships. Everyone knows that students coming out of college today aren't just competing with each other. They're competing with students from all around the world. And as a nation, we are falling behind.

Let me give you an example: each year China produces eight times as many engineers as America. India produces five times as many. So the last thing the federal government should be doing is making it harder for students to go to college – and harder for us to produce more engineers. How can we compete against them if we make it harder for parents to send their children to college?

So today, to help parents send their kids to college – I'm proposing a \$1,000 annual tax credit for every freshman and sophomore who attends a college or university in Illinois.

If you live in Illinois and you want to go to a college in Illinois – any college – you can get a \$1,000 tax credit to help pay for it. But there's one catch – you don't just get it, you have to earn it. If you study hard, do well in school, and keep a B average, you'll qualify for this tax credit – and, by the way, you'll make your parents very happy.

Yes, this is a generous tax credit. But that's what makes it meaningful. For many families, \$1,000 is a mortgage payment. It's three or four or five car payments. It's the electric bill for an entire year.

And this tax credit would also apply to grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. I want to thank Representative Lou Jones for her leadership on this issue. And, while I'm at it, I also want to thank Representative Lou Lang, who has been working on this issue for many years.

For many families, this is a tax credit that can help make the dream of college affordable and the dream of college a reality. It's a tax credit that helps parents who work hard, who love their children, and who want it better for their kids than they've had it for themselves.

I hope you join me in helping parents send their kids to college.

There is perhaps no starker difference in our values and those of the current administration in Washington than when it comes to making health care accessible and affordable to working people.

I believe that health care is a fundamental right, and today, Illinois is leading the nation in helping people exercise that right.

There are 45 million Americans who don't have health insurance. Eight million of them are children. And Congress just cut funding for Medicaid and similar programs by \$40 billion. That means even more working people could end up without health care.

In Illinois, we have different priorities. Across the nation, as more people are losing their health care, in Illinois, more people are getting health care. And because of our All Kids program, we have now done for kids, what forty years ago, Medicare did for seniors.

But even when it comes to Medicare, Washington today can't get it right.

Only in Washington could they create a Medicare prescription drug benefit that costs billions of taxpayer dollars and yet many seniors are ending up with less coverage than they had before. And they're also ending up with a lot more fear, insecurity and frustration.

Now there are a lot of states that are content to let their seniors live with the federal program and live with the consequences. We are not.

We created the Illinois Cares program so that no senior would lose coverage. In fact, Illinois is the most generous state in the nation when it comes to filling in the holes in the federal prescription drug plan. We are determined to look after our seniors, even if Washington won't.

This administration in Washington has been equally hostile when it comes to women's health care and their reproductive rights. They proposed eliminating the block grants that states use to help women detect breast cancer and cervical cancer. They oppose stem cell research. And they simply do not support women's reproductive rights and freedoms.

Over the last three years, we have made it very clear that here in Illinois, we do.

We became the first state in the Midwest to publicly fund stem cell research. We've made private health insurance companies that cover prescription drugs also cover contraceptive services and prescriptions. And we became the first state in the nation to prohibit pharmacists from turning away women – women who have every right to expect that the prescriptions their doctors give them for birth control will be filled. No delays, no lectures, no hassles. Just fill the prescription.

Now, I understand that several bills have been introduced that would overturn my executive order to protect women's reproductive freedoms. So let me make something else very clear – if any of those bills reach my desk, they are dead on arrival.

A few months ago we made history here in Illinois when we passed the All Kids program. For the first time in the history of any state, every child will have access to affordable, comprehensive health care. It's hard to imagine anything more important than making sure children have health care, but we can't stop there and we shouldn't stop there.

The elderly have health care through Medicare. That makes sense. Children now have health care through All Kids. That makes sense. But what makes no sense is that you can serve your country in the military, be willing to go overseas and fight our wars, be willing to lay your life and your liberty on the line, only to come home and find out that you can't afford to go to a doctor.

That's wrong.

There are 1.7 million veterans in America today who do not have health care. And in Washington, there's nothing realistic on the horizon that would do anything about it. If we don't do something here in Illinois, -- if we rely on Washington to act – our veterans will be left without health care and without hope.

How the federal government can let that happen to veterans is beyond me. How you can ask people to risk their lives, only to turn your back on them the minute you no longer need them is just plain wrong.

So I propose we do something about it. Today I'm announcing a plan that would ultimately lead to guaranteeing that every veteran in Illinois have access to health care. That's why this session, we should launch the first of several phases of our new program – Veterans Care. Like FamilyCare or KidCare, it means that veterans who don't have health insurance can get access to affordable, comprehensive health care.

Lt. Governor Pat Quinn and I have been putting together our Veterans Care plan ever since we started working on All Kids. The first phase of Veterans Care would cover low income veterans who don't have health insurance and who don't live within a reasonable driving distance of a VA hospital. Those are the veterans who have the least access to affordable health care. They're the ones who need our help the most, and they need it now.

While we're on the subject of people's health, there's another topic I want to address: mercury emissions. Mercury emissions pollute our air and water. Because of the dangers posed by mercury, I've proposed that Illinois become one of only four states to require a 90% capture of mercury by 2009. Here again, Washington's solution simply isn't good enough. They propose a 47% reduction in mercury emissions by 2010. That's literally a half-measure.

My proposed rule for tougher mercury standards will go before the Joint Committee on Legislative Rules this summer. For those of you here who serve on JCAR, I hope you can protect the environment and support our rule.

There's something else we can do this session to protect the environment and help consumers. I'm proposing that we give a \$500 sales tax rebate to anyone who buys fuel-efficient cars in Illinois. If you buy a car that uses E85 gasoline or biodiesel fuel or even just gets very high gas mileage, you'll be eligible for this rebate. This tax rebate means less pollution and it means drivers save money.

The first responsibility of government is public safety. And here too, we are making real progress.

Crime is down in Illinois. It has fallen by nearly 7% over the last two years. We now have fewer robberies and burglaries, fewer cars stolen, fewer arsons, and fewer murders than at any time in the last decade. Just four short years ago, there were 10,000 more violent crimes in Illinois and 31,000 more property crimes. Thanks to the efforts of the men and women in law enforcement, Illinois is a safer place.

Highway accidents and fatalities have reached a 60 year low. And our rankings on homeland security preparedness are among the best in the nation. But even in the arena of public safety, when we look to Washington, we see a federal government that's got it all wrong when it comes to common sense gun laws.

No law abiding citizen needs an Uzi or an AK 47 to be safe or to hunt. The federal assault weapon ban expired more than a year ago. Everyone in Washington said they were for extending the ban – even the President himself. And yet they let it lapse – and never looked back.

We can't keep waiting for them to act. You and I both know they won't.

So I say it's time we reinstate the assault weapons ban in Illinois.

How can we possibly allow gang bangers to be better armed than our police officers? While crime has fallen dramatically, we have seen an uptick of violent crime and gang activity in some of the suburbs surrounding Chicago. Cracking down on gun violence is no longer just a big city concern.

Last year, we tried to pass the assault weapon ban and we came close. I called many of you to ask that you vote for the bill. Back then, some of you told me you wanted to, but couldn't

because you were afraid of drawing a primary challenge. Well, the filing date for primary challenges has passed, and now it's time to pass this bill.

And just as assault weapons are a problem in our cities and suburbs, the scourge of methamphetamine is ravaging our rural communities. Meth destroys those who use it. It destroys their families. It threaten our communities. In Illinois, thanks to the General Assembly and to the hard work of Attorney General Lisa Madigan, we've passed some of the nation's toughest laws cracking down on meth. But what we've learned, is that like other addicts, most meth users go to jail, serve their time, come out, and they're addicted again.

Our initiative at the Sheridan prison to help non-violent drug offenders recover has helped people kick their addictions, stay out of jail, and stop hurting other people.

So I propose we create a version of Sheridan at the Southwestern Illinois Correctional Center to help meth addicts break the cycle of crime and addiction. And I'm proposing we do the same the following year at the Sheridan prison. This means they'll receive treatment. They'll receive counseling. They'll receive job training. And they'll have a better chance of leaving prison without the drug addiction that threatens our communities.

Three years ago, we inherited a mess here in Illinois. It was a mess created by a state government that willfully ignored the needs of working families – a government more concerned with itself than with the job of governing and problem-solving.

And for three years, we have grappled with policies from Washington, that time after time, have reflected partisan fighting instead of progress and effective policy-making. They have played games, while we have made policies that picked up the slack.

It hasn't been easy to do. It hasn't always made us popular – even with many of our own friends and supporters. But it's been the right thing to do for the people of Illinois, and, in the final analysis, that's what really matters.

Some in Washington, and many of the skeptics here in Illinois, may disagree with our priorities. But ask them this: What child's education would they cut? What working family would they raise taxes on? What child do they say should go without health care? What senior citizen do they believe should be left out in the cold?

Leadership is about real choices. It's about real-life decisions that affect people's lives. This isn't a game – it's real life. And I am proud of the causes we've taken on, of the progress we've made, and the people we've helped.

Help them get access to health care. Help them afford their medicine. Help them go to pre-school. Help them earn a decent wage. Help them collect more child support. Help them go to college. Help them get ahead.

During the time we've been gathered here today, the people of our state have been living their lives.

They've been changing shifts. They've been picking their kids up from kindergarten. They've been taking their mothers or fathers to the doctor. Working. Saving. Caring for their families. Trying to do better. That's what they do, every day.

They're counting on us.

We can never allow ourselves to go back. And we can never just settle for how far we've come.

Yes, we inherited a mess. And yes, we've made a lot of progress. But there is so much more to do.

So here's the challenge.

Let's get to work.

Thank you.